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Cynthia Orozco, "Sexism in Chicano Studies and the Community" (January 1, 1984). *National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies Annual Conference*. Paper 5.

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Sexism in Chicano Studies and the Community

Cynthia OROZCO

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank members of Raza Women's Organization, UCLA for their moral support and help. Particular thanks to Luz Calvo.

I would like to address the significance of gender and its relationship to sexism in the Chicano community and Chicano studies. Three questions are discussed: (1) How did the Chicano movement deal with women and how did Chicano studies treat the category of gender? (2) What is the significance of gender for understanding and ending the oppression Chicanas experience as women? and (3) What is the relationship between gender and feminism, and what does this mean for social change?

The Chicano movement was a nationalist struggle for the liberation of the Mexican people in the United States, though class struggle was a conscious component among various sectors. It must be clear that this movement did *not* attempt to end patriarchy, the system by which men dominate women.

Though we can speak of a Chicana movement in which women argued that women's life experiences and oppression were different and worse than men's and acted against this particular oppression, lack of ideological clarity on what gender meant hindered the Chicana movement.¹ At the time, Chicana activists did not recognize patriarchy as a system separate in origins and in everyday life and quite distinct from racism and capitalism. Chicanas struggled against the interconnectedness of this triple burden, but largely battled racism and capitalism on the ideological front. For instance, Anna Nieto Gómez, California's best-known and most controversial feminist, argued in 1977 that sexism "is part of the capitalist ideology which advocates male supremacist values."²

When Chicanas raised the issue of male domination, both the community and its intellectual arm, Chicano studies, put down the

ideology of feminism and put feminists in their place. Utilizing ideology and its corresponding actions, Chicanos continued to manifest the sexism feminists sought to eradicate.

Various sexist ideologies about feminism (and feminists) emerged from the Chicano movement. Four common ones can be discerned: (1) "El problema es el gabacho no el macho." (2) Feminism was Anglo, middle-class, and bourgeois. (3) Feminism was a diversion from the "real" and "basic" issues, that is, racism and class exploitation. (4) Feminism sought to destroy "la familia," supposedly the base of Mexican culture and the basis for resistance to domination.³

These ideologies raised some legitimate concerns, but blurred the feminist vision. Machismo was disregarded. Activists defined racism and capitalism as fundamental problems, but such issues as equal pay for equal work, sex segregation in employment, and rape were hardly considered "basic." Many feminists were Anglo and middle-class, but there were also black and other Third World working-class feminists. Chicanos stereotyped feminism to mean liberal feminism; radical feminism was ignored. Moreover, Chicana radicals had begun to redefine feminism to fit their particular triple oppression when the case against feminism was made. Similarly, while the family has embodied essential emotional and human relationships, the idea that it did not sustain oppressive or hierarchical relationships, especially for women and girls, was asserted.

While the attack on feminism in community action was overt and conscious, Chicana feminism was also undermined in Chicano studies. Chicano intellectuals argued that race and class were the determining factors in understanding the subordinate position of Mexicans in the United States.⁴ They interpreted the condition of Mexican men and women to be synonymous; gender was irrelevant in determining life experience and power. Most intellectuals were unconscious of their exclusion of the category of gender, since male thought permeates our thinking and does not allow for the female perspective and opinion. In community life, Chicano activists like César Chavez advanced male thought: he proudly asserted, "We are not beasts of burden, we are not agricultural implements or rented slaves, we are men."⁵

Rodolfo Acuña's *Occupied America*, perhaps the most widely read book about Chicanos—a work which should be considered the

"Chicano Bible"—epitomizes the lack of a conceptualization of gender.⁶ Acuña cogently describes racial and class oppression, but he does not mention gender oppression.⁷ In not doing so, he suggests a male ideology: sexism is not a problem, and therefore feminism is irrelevant to Chicanas. We must not underestimate the power of Acuña's book: teachers have organized courses around it, and it has taught thousands how to think about the oppression Mexicans experienced.

In the Chicano studies document "El Plan de Santa Barbara," the theoretical rationale for Chicano studies, a lack of consciousness about sexism and gender can be inferred.⁸ Sociologist Mary Pardo's analysis of "El Plan" shows that not once did it make reference to women, female liberation, or Chicana studies. Indeed, "El Plan" was a "man"-ifesto.⁹

College course offerings by Chicano studies centers exemplify a lack of awareness about the problem of sexism and the importance of gender. Most small centers offered the token "La Chicana" (usually as a result of Chicana feminists' annual struggle to ensure it) which usually covered all topics briefly and none thoroughly.¹⁰ At some schools, even this class has not been institutionalized. The women teaching these courses have overwhelmingly been part-time workers.¹¹ The omission of courses on women and the lack of Chicana faculty help to explain the weak feminist consciousness among students and the lack of support systems for young women.¹²

In short, feminism has been suppressed and feminists have been repressed. What is the significance of this? Many lack an understanding of male domination in society; therefore, the oppression that Mexican women suffer which is specific to their gender has hardly been challenged. Moreover, Chicana studies today are underdeveloped. It is time to study problems specific to Chicanas and to rectify them.¹³

To do so, we must understand the significance of gender. It determines life experience, power, and privilege, and the division of labor is created on the basis of it.¹⁴ Our identities are formed by work. Thereby, men learn to be men and women learn to be women; gender is largely a social construction.¹⁵ This varies according to historical period and culture and is subject to change.

Society gives social significance to gender, and a system of power is organized around it. This system is patriarchy or male domina-

tion or machismo, if we extend its usual connotation. Its origins are different from those of racism and capitalism, and it is the most universal and historical system.

Patriarchy is sophisticated: it has both structural and ideological features.¹⁶ The key structural feature is the division of labor by sex. Arising from this is the ideological feature of femininity and masculinity, our gender identities. Femininity must not be seen solely as a female-creation; it complements masculinity, which also serves as a foundation for male dominance.¹⁷

In contrast to patriarchy is feminism. Feminism is a recognition of the domination of men over women and attempts by women to end male privilege. It also seeks to redefine female-to-female relations. Feminism is all-encompassing since it is a theory, a method, and a practice which seeks to transform human relations.¹⁸ Feminism is necessary for liberation.

How can feminism affect social change? How does it relate to women and higher education? To begin, "higher education" demands redefinition, since only 6 percent of our Latina population attend institutions of higher learning.¹⁹ We must broaden our strategies to include the majority of our community.

Schools alienate and exclude women and men, girls and boys. Alternative institutions and mediums must be created, and we must take higher education to common people. Here, higher education is defined not as institutions, but as the realm of thought. We must disseminate our knowledge and progressive perspectives to the community by presenting strategies for change. At the same time, we must listen to the community, for it speaks to us. We must move beyond the barriers that the university seeks to maintain between a privileged sector and the mass of exploited and oppressed Mexicans. Sexism has no geographical barriers—it thrives at the university—nor should feminism stay in the college setting. Feminism belongs in the community.

Higher education promotes the liberation of the oppressed and rejects hierarchy. Feminism as theory and daily practice should be an integral feature of this higher education so we can end the exploitation of women in the home, sexual harassment on the job, sex segregation in employment, wife abuse, and rape.

These strategies imply a vision of the future, a vision of hope. In the spirit of change, visions are revisions. Today, we revise "El Plan

de Santa Barbara” to encompass the feminist voice it lacked in 1969.²⁰ We have appropriately called it “El Plan de Santa y Barbara” since it is a proposal written to Chicano studies across the nation in hope that feminism will reemerge in strength. It follows:

We will move forward toward our destiny as women. We will move against those forces which have denied us freedom of expression and human dignity. Due to the sexist structure of this society, to our essentially different life style, and to the socio-economic functions assigned to our community by male society—as suppliers of free labor and a dumping ground for male aggression, the female community remains exploited, impoverished, and abused.

As a result, the self-determination of the female community is now the only acceptable mandate for social and political action; it is the essence of Chicana commitment.

Culturally, the word “feminism,” in the past a pejorative and class-bound word, has now become the root idea of a new cultural identity for women. Feminism draws its faith and strength from two main sources: from the just struggle of women and from an objective analysis of our community’s strategic needs.

It is in this spirit, that we meet in Austin, Texas, in mid-March, over 400 Chicano students, faculty, administrators, and community delegates representing Aztlán.

Let us part with the words of a Chicana feminist named Sra. Josefa Vasconcelos. She said, “At this moment we do not come to work for Chicano studies and the community, but to demand that Chicano studies and the community work for our liberation too.”

NOTES

1. Carlos Vasquez has pointed to the problem of ideological clarity among Chicana feminists yet subsumes the feminist cause under the Marxist-Leninist struggle and fails to acknowledge patriarchy. “Women in the Chicano Movement,” in *Mexican Women in the United States: Struggles Past and Present*, ed. Magdalena Mora and Adelaida R. del Castillo (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 1980), pp. 27-28. For a critique of the so-called “woman question,” see Heidi Hartman, “The Unhappy Marriage between Marxism and Feminism,” *Capital and Class* 8 (Summer, 1979):1-33.

2. Nieto Gómez was the Chicana movement's eminent intellectual/activist; she waged war on the triple oppression Chicanas suffer. Her writing reflects lack of clarity on the origins and nature of this burden, but to some extent this can be attributed to the interconnectedness of capitalism, racism, and sexism. Adelaida R. del Castillo notes that "Chicana feminism itself was delineated not so much through cohesive political statements as through the focus of issues and activities" (Anna Nieto Gómez, "Sexism in the Movimiento," *La Gente* (February, 1975):10; Adelaida R. del Castillo, "Mexican Women in Organization," in *Mexican Women in the United States*, 11). *This Bridge Called My Back* should be credited with adding new vigor to women's studies and Third World women's studies in particular. (*This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldua (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1981).

3. Both antifeminist and feminist writings of the Chicano movement and other Third World movements have been collected by Dorinda Moreno, *La Mujer en Pie de Lucha: y la Hora Es Ya!* (San Francisco: Espina del Norte, 1973). A critique of the notion of feminism as an Anglo, bourgeois diversion is Cynthia Orozco, "Feminism: How Chicanos 'Skirt' the Issue," *La Gente* (June, 1983):17, and a critique of the "cult of la familia" has been launched by Beatriz Pesquera. See also Cherríe Moraga, "A Long Line of Vendidas," *Loving in the War Years, Lo Oue Nunca Paso Por Sus Labios* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

4. Students have transformed intellectual analysis and theory into action, and therefore MECHA's agenda has also reflected the lack of understanding of patriarchy. Mechistas have challenged sexist behavior and attitudes but fail to perceive the systematic nature of women's oppression. See Irene Rodarte, "Machismo vs. Revolution" in Moreno, *La mujer*, 36-40, and Marta Arguello, "Phallic Politics," *La Gente* (March/April, 1984):5.

5. Quoted in Paul Fusco and George D. Horwitz, *La Causa: The California Grape Strike* (New York: Collier Books, 1970), n.p.

6. Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: The Chicano's Struggle Toward Liberation* (San Francisco: Canfield Press, 1972).

7. Acuña made various changes in his second edition but no fundamental change in his conceptualization of women in history. His changes reflect what historians have called "compensatory history." The Mexican American Studies Program at the University of Houston sponsored a symposium on the classic, but no women were invited, nor was gender analyzed. See Rodolfo Acuña, *Occupied America: the Chicano's Struggle toward Liberation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); Mary Pardo, "Mexicanas/Chicanas: Forgotten Chapter of History," *El Popo* 14/4 (February/March, 1980):8; *Occupied America: A Chicano History Symposium* (Houston: Mexican American Studies Program, 1982); and Cynthia Orozco, "Chicana Labor History: A Critique of Male Consciousness in Historical Writing," *La Red* 77 (February, 1984); and Acuña's sexist and paternalistic response, Rudy Acuña, "Letter to the Editor," *La Red* 79 (April, 1984).

8. Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, *El Plan de Santa Barbara: A Chicano Plan for Higher Education* (Oakland: La Causa Publications, 1969).

9. Mary Pardo, "A Selective Evaluation of El Plan de Santa Barbara," *La Gente* (March/April, 1984):14-15. While it could be argued that the feminist movement in the United States was still at an incipient stage in 1969, recent Chicano studies documents and activities continue to reflect limited consciousness.

10. The fundamental base, Chicana history, has only recently been promoted by some Chicano studies centers. The product of the first symposium on Chicana history is forthcoming; see *Women's History in Transition: Content, Theory, and Method in Chicana/Mexicana History*, ed. Adelaida R. del Castillo (Los Angeles: Chicano Studies Research Center Publications, 1985).

11. Chicano studies must be recognized not only as centers for the production of Chicano ideology, but as workplaces. Female teachers and clerical workers have confronted sex segregation, sexual harassment, and the lack of recognition for their work. Anna Nieto Gómez has become the symbol of the female struggle in Chicana studies as an idealogue and as a worker; she was ousted by the Chicano studies program at California State University at Northridge.

12. See California State University at Los Angeles, Mecha, "Chicano Studies Accused of Fostering Male Chauvinism," in Moreno, *La mujer*, p. 22; and Mujeres en Marcha, *Chicanas in the 80's: Unsettled Issues* (Berkeley: Chicano Studies Library Publications Unit, 1983) for a recent critique. Of more than 500 individuals listed, Julio Martinez's reference work on Chicano scholars listed only 97 women. The National Chicano Council on Higher Education listed 38 women out of 144 members in 1982 (Julio Martínez, *Chicano Scholars and Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Directory* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1979); Richard Chabran, "Chicana Reference Sources," *La Gente* (February/March, 1984):18-19; National Chicano Council on Higher Education List of Members, 1982).

13. Chicana feminists made early attempts to delineate Chicana studies but lacked the positions of center directors and professorships to disseminate and distribute curriculum. A rationale, course proposals, outlines, and a bibliography on Chicana history, sociology, literature, and higher education can be found in *New Directions in Education, Estudios Femeniles de la Chicana*, ed. Anna Nieto Gómez (Los Angeles: UCLA Extension and Montal Educational Associates, 1974); and Odalmira L. García, *Chicana Studies Curriculum Guide, Grades 9-12* (Austin: National Educational Laboratory Publishers, 1978). For a summary of recent literature, see Cordelia Candelaria, "Six Reference Works on Mexican American Women: A Review Essay," *Frontiers*, 5/2 (1980):75-80.

14. *Women, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); *Towards an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); Heidi Hart-

man, "Capitalism, Patriarchy, and Job Segregation by Sex," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1/3 (Spring, 1976), part 2:137-169.

15. Joan Kelly-Gadol, "The Social Relations of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History," *Signs*, 1/4 (Summer, 1976):809-824; Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

16. *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case of Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).

17. Susan Brownmiller, *Femininity* (New York: Linden Press/Simon and Schuster, 1984).

18. Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs*, 7/3 (Spring, 1982):515-544. See also Cynthia Orozco, "Crónica Feminista," *La Gente* (February/March, 1983):8.

19. Current issues on Chicanas and higher education can be found in the Stanford newsletter *Intercambios Femeniles*. Pioneer Chicana feminists raised the issues facing Chicanas and their access to education. See Corinne Sánchez, "Higher Education y la Chicana?" and Anna Nieto Gómez de Lazarín, "The Chicana—Perspectives for Education," *Encuentro Femenil*, 1/1 (September, 1973): 27-33, 35-61.

20. Chicano Coordinating Council on Higher Education, "Manifesto," *El Plan de Santa Barbara*, pp. 9-11.